

Comments submitted to Montana Board of Public Education July 12, 2007
Montana High School Graduation Requirements and the Arts
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I agree that rigor is important in a high quality education. Our own and others' expectations of excellence create in us a desire to improve.

Given some of the developments I have seen in terms of arts education since the implementation of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) I want to caution that narrowing the curriculum does not become an unintended consequence if there are new high school graduation requirements in Montana.

Even though the arts are considered core subjects in NCLB, I know from experience that because they are not tested they are often the subjects that are cut from the schedule and the budget.

In a 2006 report from the Center for Education Policy 22% of the school districts in their survey reported they had reduced time for art and music to make more time for reading and math.¹

Expression in the arts is part of what makes us human. The arts connect to our emotions and often open doors to other subjects in the curriculum. They are part of the process of educating the whole child.

I know this Board values the role the arts play in education. The introduction to the Montana Board of Public Education's Content Standards for Arts says in part:

"The Arts enable students to make decisions and seek multiple solutions. They improve perception, reflection, and creative thought. They advance higher order thinking skills of analysis, synthesis and evaluation. The Arts provide powerful tools for understanding human experiences and cultures—past, present and future.

"Arts education engages students in a creative process that helps them develop the self-motivation, discipline, cooperation and self-esteem necessary for success in life."

The arts can also be an avenue of success for students who often experience failure in other subjects in school. At the Arts Council we have many testimonies from teachers who say during an artist residency they see new skills and understanding in students that are frequently low achievers.

In addition to anecdotal data the arts education community has made a concerted effort to support scientifically- based research on the outcomes of arts education programs. I'll share just a few examples.

Research

Students at risk of not successfully completing their high school educations cite their participation in the arts as reasons for staying in school. Factors related to the arts that positively affected the motivation of these students included a supportive environment that promotes constructive acceptance of criticism and one where it is safe to take risks.²

When young children participate in creative drama in the classroom, they engage in activities that can improve both their reading comprehension and writing ability.³

Research shows there is a strong causal link between learning how to play music and the development of abstract reasoning skills, which can play an important role in mathematics and science education and also influences reading and verbal capabilities and writing ability.⁴

Sustained involvement in theatre arts encourages improvement in the reading proficiency of low-income youth. According to the National Educational Longitudinal Survey (NELS:88), nearly 20 percent more students were reading at high proficiency than their non-theatre peers by the 12th grade.⁵

Participation in the arts helps students improve social skills. Low-income students with sustained participation in theatre arts were shown over time to have improved self-confidence, greater motivation and higher levels of empathy for peers according to a ten-year national study of over 25,000 high school students.⁶

Arts Education Partnership (AEP). (2005) *Third Space: When Learning Matters* is based on a three-year research study that examined the impact of an arts-centered curriculum on school improvement. It describes the process of transformation in 10 elementary, middle and high schools serving economically disadvantaged students in rural and urban regions of the country.

Improved student behavior and attendance rates were attributed to the schools' arts programs. Students themselves reported that the arts kept them engaged in school. As one high school student noted, "If it wasn't for this program, I wouldn't be in school at this point."

Teachers and district officials credited their school's arts programs for the improved scores of students on standardized tests, including improvement in reading and mathematics.

Teachers reported increased satisfaction and renewal. They enjoyed teaching more, primarily because of the responsiveness of their students and the new level of collaboration with other teachers in the school.

This satisfaction was evident not only in the way teachers talked about their work, but also in a reduction in teacher turnover reported at eight of the 10 schools.

Family Photos

We also understand that the arts are more than statistical data on how educational goals can be accomplished.

One of the best ways I have heard for communicating this aspect of the arts was done by arts administrator and advocate, Ben Cameron. Mr. Cameron is currently the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation Program Director for the Arts.

He began by saying, "There is a study from the Harris pole: What's the first thing people grab when there is a fire and people run out the door? And the answer is: the family photos."

He believes that the arts function as our family photos.

As someone whose grandparents moved to Montana as young adults or children, whose parents were born and raised here and who herself moved here 26 years ago, I think the poems of Richard Hugo and Wally McRae, the novels of James Welch and Ivan Diog and the short stories of Mary Clearman Blew are my family photos.

The bead work of Agnes "Oshanee" Kenmille, the dolls of Birdie Real Bird and the quilts of Shelly Van Haur are my family photos.

The dances of the Latino community in Billings and the Hmong community in Missoula are my family photos.

The music of Rob Quist and the Great Northern Band and the songs of the Starr School Singers are my family photos.

The sunsets of Charlie Russell are my family photos.

The arts engage students who are already successful and in need of greater challenges, and also engage those who might otherwise become disconnected and never realize their own potential for success.

¹ Center on Education Policy. (March 2006). From the Capital to the Classroom: Year 4 of the No Child Left Behind Act.

² Barry, N., J. Taylor, and K. Walls. (2002). "The Role of the Fine and Performing Arts in High School Dropout Prevention." In R. Deasy (Ed.), *Critical Links: Learning in the Arts and Student Achievement and Social Development*, Washington, DC: AEP.

³ Arts Education Partnership. (2004). The arts and education: New opportunities for research.

⁴ Hetland, L. & Winner, E., eds. (2000). The arts and academic achievement: What the evidence shows. *The Journal of Aesthetic Education*.

⁵ Catterall, J. (1998). Involvement in the arts and success in secondary school. *Americans for the Arts Monographs* January.

⁶ Weiss, S. (2004). The arts in education. *The Progress of Education Reform*, 5(1).